

Employer Guidelines: Questions for your consideration

How can we be fair and just employers of workers in our homes?

Labor without dignity is the cause of misery; rest without spirit the source of depravity.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

At adult education sessions facilitated by the Worker Justice Committee, Hakafa members came together to prepare this set of guidelines to help those of us who employ or might be thinking about employing people in our homes. These workers might include housecleaners, nannies, eldercare workers, landscapers, and the like. Our discussions revealed our own perspectives as employers, and our conversations with domestic workers allowed us to better understand their reality as employees.

More than one hundred of the Torah's 613 commandments address issues of economic justice, many of them focusing on our relationships with employees and the strangers in our midst. If our homes are to be considered the *mikdash me'at*, the small sanctuaries that Jewish tradition endorses that they be, then issues of economic justice should begin in the most intimate and intentional spaces we inhabit.

Our hope is that you will use this document to guide your thinking and practices.

I. Do you communicate clearly and openly?

Death and life are in the power of the tongue.... (Proverbs 18:21)

- Do you make an effort to see that your employee feels **welcome, comfortable, and respected** in your home, which is also her/his work place?
- Have you **communicated your expectations** clearly to your employee—e.g., scope of work, hours needed, specific task instructions and preferences? If not and work needs to be redone, do you pay for the extra time?
- Could you set out the job responsibilities in a **written agreement** (copied in the worker's native language), including the employment term and frequency, and provision for at least two weeks' termination notice?
- Do you **check in regularly** to offer guidance and/or appreciation? Could you sit down together at least once a year for an evaluation?
- If there is a **language barrier**, have you explored ways to overcome it—for example, by using a designated translator or a bilingual checklist?
- For care workers who become like members of the family, do you make sure that their **status as professional workers** is still respected?

II. Do you pay fair wages?

You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. (Leviticus 19:13)

- Do you pay your employee a **living wage** (at least \$15/hour) on an agreed payment schedule?
- If you employ a part-time housecleaner, is each visit a **minimum of 3 hours** – to make the job worth the time to get there?
- Do you **increase wages** when responsibilities increase and **pay overtime** for hours over 8 hours/day?
- Do you provide an **annual raise** at the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) rate?
- **When you go on vacation or cancel** your employee's work time for any reason, do you pay your employee his/her regular wages?
- Have you considered **transportation costs** and the **worker's own childcare expenses** when setting an hourly fee?
- Have you discussed **Social Security** with your employee?
- Could you provide **severance** in accordance with the number of years worked?
- For care workers, do you provide **petty cash** for activities, meals, or other work-related expenses?
- Do you provide **worker's compensation insurance** for full-time workers (as required by Illinois law)?

III. Do you provide time off and other benefits?

... but the seventh day is the Sabbath of Adonai; in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your children, nor the men and women who work for you ... nor the stranger that is within your gates. (Exodus 20:10)

- Do you provide **adequate break time**, as needed by your employee? Thirty minutes for lunch and a 15-minute break each morning and afternoon is standard; heavy work may require longer and more flexible breaks. If rest breaks are not possible, do you compensate the employee extra for this time?
- Do you provide **two or more weeks of paid vacation** at a mutually agreed-upon time, not necessarily the time of your vacation?
- Do you provide days off on the **standard eight paid government holidays** or agreed-upon holidays of the employee's choice?
- Do you provide paid **sick leave and personal days**, commensurate with the number of hours per week the worker is in your employ?
- If needed, could you provide your employee with at least one month of **paid family or medical leave** and guaranteed employment upon return?
- Can you help your employee access adequate **health care**? Possible ways include: adding \$2 per hour (or other agreed amount) to the employee's pay; covering some determined aspect of health care; sharing costs with other employers of the worker.

IV. Is your home a healthy workplace?

The remembrance of the Exodus calls to our consciousness not only the physical protection of laborers, but their emotional and spiritual protection as well. ("Remembrance and Labor," Rabbi Saul J. Berman)

- If the worker will be using your cleaning products, do you offer the option of **non-toxic products**?
- Does your employee have **access to kitchen facilities** to prepare food brought for lunch, get a glass of water, or have a snack? Have you told the worker which of your foods, if any, he/she is welcome to eat?
- If you have an **aggressive pet**, did you let the worker know when hired, and have you made arrangements to ensure that the worker is safe in your home?
- Is your home **free from harassment/discrimination** of any kind, based on gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, or any other reason?
- Have you made sure **not to set up conditions where the integrity of the worker is tested or questioned**, such as leaving money or valuables around?
- Do you provide **appropriate and respectful supervision** of your employee without giving the feeling that you're hovering?

V. What if you hire through an agency?

- Have you **asked the agency** the following questions? Let the agency know that these factors are important to you and impact your choice of an agency.
 - **How much do you pay** your workers per hour?
 - Does the employee get to keep 100% of any **tips** I provide?
 - Do you provide **pay for sick days, holidays, vacations, travel time, and overtime**?
 - Do you provide **training, regular raises, healthcare benefits, and worker's compensation**?

Thank you for considering what you can do!

Many thanks to

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